

# THE CRITIC.



BY GEOFFREY JUVENAL, ESQ.

No. XVI.

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 1820.

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THE subjoined letter was received a few days since, and notwithstanding my cousin's injunction at the close of it, I am compelled by a sense of justice to her, and my readers, to publish it immediately. The truth of the remarks contained is incontrovertible, and I have not the vanity to suppose, that it is in my power to exhibit them in a more convincing manner. If I can obtain my pardon for presenting her private letters thus hastily, to the world, I shall urge a continuation of the same subject, as I am satisfied it affords a rich field for criticism.

DEAR GEOFFREY,

The last rainy evening I was quite alone, and feeling no disposition to read, imperceptibly fell into a long fit of musing on my past life. Innumerable scenes of pleasure that we enjoyed together in early life, passed in review—our festive parties—dances—water expeditions—sleighings—reading nights—each in its turn recalled some delightful occurrences, or the mournful and tender remembrance of departed friends. But, on no social meetings, did I dwell with more real satisfaction, than on the informal, weekly *conversation parties*, at your house. A man of astonishing acquirements, has remarked, that the greater part of his knowledge was obtained in conversation, and I am perfectly sure, that any valuable information I may now possess, is almost exclusively the product of the happy hours spent in those "*soirées*." Beyond our own chosen circle, as you well remember, the difficulty of introduction secured us from unwelcome intruders. Fops, triflers, false wits, and idle praters were perseveringly rejected; and petulance, captiousness, coarse jesting, or noisy debate never appeared amongst us. Ample opportunity and invitation to discourse on his favourite topics, were afforded to every member. Our reasoning powers were improved and exercised, and the results of our reading arranged for practical utility, by frequent arguments, conducted in the most candid, libe-

ral, and amicable manner. Gaiety and sportiveness were always welcome, but were never suffered to interrupt grave discussion, or to engross a whole evening consecrated to mental improvement. The feelings of our friends were always safe in those assemblies. A degree of delicacy, indeed, prevailed, which I have never witnessed since: for not only was the general rule of shunning painful or disagreeable subjects *strictly* observed, but conversation in which any one present would appear wholly deficient, was by tacit consent entirely avoided, or confined to a part of the company.—In all the meetings that I called to mind, my recollection did not produce one instance of intemperate dispute, ill-natured retort or sarcastic rudeness. A stupid hour was unknown, and nothing could have severed the members of that club, but the irresistible hand of fate. Scarcely a solitary individual of the set, except ourselves, now remains on the face of the earth.

But my dear cousin, I know you are wondering for what purpose I eulogize and describe thus minutely a party which must be far more familiar to you, than it is to myself. It is my wish to solicit your attention to the subject of *conversation* as it is conducted at the present day, and with this view I carry you back to former scenes; for, if my memory fails not, the comparison will result decidedly in favour of the "olden time."

We all agree that conversation, like com-

merce, should afford a mart for the exchange of intellectual commodities, collected from various regions, and prepared for transfer and for use, by the industry and skill of their possessors. Every avenue should be opened for a fair competition, and the sure and ready attainment of a liberal profit—in respect and applause, excite powerful emulation. The pursuits of every man differ, in some particulars, from those of his neighbour; and the course of reflection upon a given subject is not precisely the same in the minds of any two human beings. Hence the importance of a free interchange of our thoughts, and an unrestrained communication of our studies and daily acquirements. By this method, moreover, we may multiply our efforts for improvement almost indefinitely, and exhibit in scientific and literary processes many of the wonders which the division of labour has produced in the arts. In hours of mere amusement and relaxation, also, wit may exercise its powers without exhausting them, and humour delight us with its vagaries, without trespassing upon every serious occupation. In *theory*, we all admit the truth of these principles, and acknowledge the important benefits that may be derived from a well-regulated conversation. But such is not the practice even in the best society of this city. Amusement for the passing hour is the universal object; and for this, taste, refinement, the feelings of friends, and the acquisition of

valuable information, are gaily sacrificed. One of the most glaring defects that strike you in general conversation now, is the total neglect of what we used to term the "*eloquence of the parlour*"—that earnestness in the subject and happy choice of words and phrases that we so often admired in our friend M——. His discourse, like a well-written composition, carried you imperceptibly along, engaged all your attention, enlisted your feelings on his side, and always left a delightful impression in his favour at its termination. But, when deeply interested in the matter before us, the command of words which he had acquired by an habitual selection and use of elegant language, displayed itself in the most fascinating oratory. Nor did his harangues at any time savour of formal pedantry, or wear the air of studied preparation. Always easy and unconstrained, his conversation differed in tone only as the nature of the discussion called forth greater or less warmth and excitement. Should M—— appear once more in the brilliant circles of fashion here, and attempt to converse amidst the "*bald disjointed chat*" of the present race, how unmercifully should we hear him ridiculed and hooted. *Horrid prosing—methodist preaching—talking by the card, and talking out of book*"—are contemptuous charges hurled against any one who ventures to express himself in a complete sentence—but poor M—— would be the prince of "*speechi-*

*fiers.*" And worst of all, gentlemen, whose education is completed, and style acquired in the stable, at the gaming table and the tavern-clubroom, would be the critics to sit in judgment on him!

Another defect which destroys cheerful and profitable conversation, and by its everlasting intrusion, and exhausted efforts, banishes the very amusement it is expected to create, is the constant jesting-fun, quizzing *badinage*, or (give it what technical appellation you choose) perpetual *banter*, that disgraces almost every social meeting at present. This spirit is abhorrent to every thing that is noble, elevated or dignified. Correct and manly sentiment, delicacy, generosity and tenderness, are the favourite marks at which its coarse and illiberal ridicule is unceasingly directed. The best feelings of the heart are despised as childish weaknesses, and the rage for saying "*good things*" so irresistible, that any of the company, male or female, may be insulted and hurt, if a momentary laugh can be raised at their expense. The most agreeable and instructive discussion is interrupted for a despicable pun or quibble; and the repetition of stale jokes, or the incessant application of cant phrases, is the only talk which the patrons of this system can tolerate. The common rules of good manners which an elder and better school established by example as well as precept, are unceremoniously dispensed-with—and a jest is always considered a



full apology for rudeness or neglect. An *effort* to be witty, generally results in failure, and it is but fair to suppose the jesters of the day convinced of the truth of this maxim—for they blunder on from failure to failure, in hopes of at least saying one “good thing” during the day. If they are over serious, they are often shockingly rude—if not, they pass their lives in the most piteous foolery. It is not the reckless merriment of youth, that, once enjoyed, returns them to graver pursuits, restored and invigorated by their occasional gaiety,—but a continued morbid action and excitement that debilitates the mental powers, and incapacitates them from any useful effort. One of our friends used to define sport as “the art of glancing off moral instruction;” and the bantering and buffoonery of the present race, may be as accurately described “the art of arresting all improvement.” Time spent in such company is worse than lost—for the injury to the heart and understanding, long survives the disgusting hour when it is inflicted.

These are a few of the errors in the present style of conversation which have a tendency to destroy its charms and render it worse than useless. Others struck me in the course of my solitary evening reflections—but you must be weary of your prosing cousin by this time, and I have but one additional request to make—that you do not gratify your

own indolence by publishing this careless scrawl, instead of writing an essay yourself on these abuses of the divine faculty of speech.

Yours affectionately,

D. JUVENAL.